

BETTER TOGETHER

Discovering Joy in Company

INITIATIVE



Connection, Loneliness and Belonging in the Work Environment

Version 0.5 - Preliminary version, Request for comments

Preface

Loneliness at work is more common than you think. We all crave connection, yet in today's workplaces—whether remote, hybrid, or in-office—it's easy to feel disconnected. These cravings need to be addressed. This brochure isn't a structured course, but rather a collection of insights, practical tips, and thoughtful prompts designed to help you recognize the value of social connections and build stronger relationships at work. By highlighting the importance of connection and belonging, we aim to empower you and your organization to create environments where everyone feels genuinely welcomed, included, and valued. Ultimately, through this guide, the Initiative Gemeinsamkeit helps employers support their employees in building meaningful connections and creating workplaces where everyone truly feels they belong.

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This document is currently still an early draft / request for comments. Eventually it is intended as a template to provide other providers, cities, and municipalities with a starting point to add or integrate their regional and local offerings.

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Summary

Social Connection at Work

Social connections at work are the foundation of a supportive and productive environment, where employees feel recognized, valued, and empowered to contribute their best.

Loneliness

Loneliness is a signal that vital social needs are unmet, and when prolonged, it can impact mental and physical health, reducing overall well-being and workplace engagement.

Belonging

Belonging transforms the workplace into a community, fostering trust, collaboration, and shared purpose that drives both individual fulfillment and organizational success.

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of home office arrangements have reshaped how we connect at work, often reducing spontaneous, in-person interactions. While virtual collaboration tools have enabled continuity, they can also contribute to feelings of isolation if not used mindfully. Many organizations are now striving to blend digital and face-to-face engagements to maintain a sense of community. Balancing remote work with periodic in-person interactions is key to fostering authentic connections and ensuring employees feel truly supported.

How can I think about my social connections? Am I possibly a bit lonely? Which parts are good, where may I still improve my situation?

- 1.) In my daily life, I interact with people I generally like (+)
- 2.) I generally have enough available time to nurture my social contacts (+)
- 3.) I miss the feeling and joy of socializing (-)
- 4.) There are people I care for and help (+)
- 5.) There are people who understand me and my feelings well (+)
- 6.) My interests and ideas are not shared by others (-)
- 7.) I hardly have anyone to support me with minor questions or daily activities (-)
- 8.) I generally have enough energy to meet my family and friends (+)
- 9.) There are people around me with whom I can create things, who challenge me in my passions (+)
- 10.) I participate in local social life, in clubs, the community, or the neighborhood (+)
- 11.) I am in a romantic relationship where I feel comfortable and seen (+)
- 12.) I sometimes feel surrounded by strangers with whom I cannot connect (-)
- 13.) There are people who challenge and support me in my personal development (+)
- 14.) I feel isolated or ignored by my surroundings (-)
- 15.) There are people who like me and show it, for example, through a hug or other gestures (+)
- 16.) When push comes to shove, I know someone will support me (+)
- 17.) I believe my life and activities have meaning (+)
- 18.) Despite my need for human connection, it is also important to me that my independence and privacy are respected (-)
- 19.) My social circle shares my values and cultural background (+)

Additionally here are five further statements about social connections at work

- 20.) I feel a sense of camaraderie and friendship with my coworkers.
- 21.) I feel included and valued in the social culture of my workplace..
- 22.) I enjoy everyday social moments at work, like coffee breaks and casual conversations.
- 23.) I feel that people at work understand me and are there when I need support.
- 24.) I feel accepted and valued by my colleagues for who I am.

These questions are not designed to give you a score of loneliness, but rather to expose you to different aspects of it, needs and circumstances.

If answering these questions feels overwhelming or burdensome for you, please stop and turn to a professional support option such as Telefonseelsorge or Virtual Support Talks.



Alternatively we can think in this project about an exclusively work related questionnaire?

● General Sense of Connection

- 1.) I feel connected to the people at my workplace.
- 2.) I have at least one person at work I can confide in.
- 3.) My work environment fosters open communication and mutual exchange.
- 4.) I feel that my opinions and ideas are appreciated.
- 5.) My team actively supports one another in everyday work life.

● Involvement in Social Activities

- 6.) I am regularly invited to informal conversations or shared activities.
- 7.) There are opportunities to get to know colleagues outside of work-related tasks.
- 8.) In meetings and discussions, I feel heard and included.
- 9.) My organization offers opportunities for social interaction, even for remote or hybrid employees.
- 10.) I experience my work culture as open and inclusive.

● Signs of Loneliness or Isolation

- 11.) I often feel alone or isolated, even though I'm surrounded by others.
- 12.) I find it difficult to build connections with my colleagues.
- 13.) I feel that my work receives little attention or appreciation.
- 14.) I hesitate to ask my colleagues for support.
- 15.) I wish for more social contact at work but don't know how to create it.

● Support from the Organization

- 16.) My company acknowledges the importance of social connection at work.
- 17.) There are programs or initiatives that promote relationship-building among employees.
- 18.) Managers and team leaders actively contribute to a positive and inclusive work environment.
- 19.) The organization supports a balance between remote and in-person work to foster connection.
- 20.) There are clear points of contact or resources available if I feel isolated or excluded.



If answering these questions feels overwhelming or burdensome for you, please stop and turn to a professional support option such as Telefonseelsorge or Virtual Support Talks.

Social connection at work - why does it matter

The first step is to reflect on your current connections, and in the following pages we provide practical pointers to help you do just that. You'll explore how everyday positive interactions—from a friendly smile to genuine check-ins—lay the groundwork for deeper relationships. The section walks you through self-assessment tools to understand where your social connections thrive and where they might need nurturing. It then offers actionable strategies for building quality bonds, whether you're working side-by-side or virtually. By embracing these insights, you take an important step toward creating a more supportive and fulfilling work environment.

What are (good) social connections at work

Definition

Good social connections at work are relationships that foster trust, support, and genuine engagement among colleagues. They involve both everyday casual interactions and deeper, meaningful exchanges that provide emotional and practical support, ultimately enhancing well-being, productivity, and a sense of belonging. Emphasis is placed on quality—it's not about the quantity of contacts, but the depth of the connections. Varied approaches are recognized, acknowledging that while some employees value close personal bonds, others may prefer to keep their work relationships strictly professional. Regardless of style, maintaining some strong bonds—at work or elsewhere—is crucial for social health.

Impact of positive workplace relationships

Good workplace relationships have a measurable impact on employee well-being and engagement, as consistently shown by research. Studies indicate that positive interactions among colleagues reduce stress levels, heighten job satisfaction, and bolster mental health. They also create a “psychological safety net,” encouraging open communication, shared problem-solving, and mutual support—all of which lead to stronger performance and higher morale. Gallup's findings, for instance, show that employees who have a “best friend” at work are far more engaged—up to seven times more likely—than those without close bonds. Over time, these supportive and trusting environments contribute to greater retention, productivity, and an overall sense of thriving at work.

How often do I engage in positive, informal conversations at work?

Building relationships through daily actions

Strong relationships at work often grow from simple, consistent gestures of kindness and positivity. Greeting colleagues by name, showing genuine interest in their projects, and offering small moments of acknowledgment are powerful ways to nurture trust and warmth in everyday interactions. These seemingly minor habits help build familiarity, providing the foundation upon which deeper and more meaningful connections can be developed.

Relationship researcher John Gottman highlights that it's the frequency of small, positive interactions—rather than grand gestures—that creates lasting bonds. Regular exchanges of encouragement or brief expressions of appreciation accumulate over time, significantly boosting mutual respect and connection. By intentionally incorporating these "micro-positive" behaviors into daily routines, we steadily reinforce the social bonds that sustain engagement, well-being, and trust at work.

How relationships grow over time?

Moreover, research by Jeffrey Hall (2018) underscores that meaningful connections require consistent interaction over considerable periods—often dozens of hours spent together. Workplaces naturally provide such opportunities, offering countless small moments each week to strengthen connections incrementally. If we approach these opportunities openly, each small interaction becomes a building block toward deeper relationships, ultimately enriching both our personal experience and professional success.

Friendship vs good acquaintances

Now here is a disclaimer - some people develop some great friendships at work and it generally improves their overall experience at work. However this is not for everyone, and not only because of introversion, but for a variety of reasons. Work has hierarchies, gossip, politics and a whole other adverse aspects that are much less prominent in other social environments. So it is absolutely perfectly acceptable to play it safe and choose not to open up to these risks or at least play it very safe.

Still, as time goes by and relationships improve it is still great to acknowledge and appreciate some of them for great acquaintanceships and mutual enrichments of the work experience and time spent there.

Building connection through immediacy

One key element in building meaningful workplace relationships is genuine attention and presence during interactions. In today's screen-dominated world, digital tools can act as filters that subtly reduce the richness of our communication, limiting the depth of our interactions. By consciously choosing moments to fully engage, listen actively, and be present—especially when face-to-face—we strengthen bonds and enhance mutual understanding.

Reflecting on our interactions since the pandemic helps us realize that digital communication, while practical, isn't always enough for truly meaningful connections. Have our habits—quick chats, brief online meetings, or multitasking—actually supported relationship-building, or have they diluted the quality of our engagement? Making intentional use of in-office time for personal interactions and fostering creative exchanges can significantly boost relationship quality and team cohesion. Paying attention to others, sharing ideas openly, and creating small yet meaningful encounters ensures our relationships remain vibrant and supportive.

Virtual connections

On the other hand, virtual meetings and interaction are now a given. With these came a score of bad habits, behaviour that would never be tolerated in one-on-one meetings, specifically when it comes to multitasking. The temptation to have several items and screens open distracts from the current conversation you are having.

It might be good to have a code or work agreement of what is acceptable and what isn't. In particular things like „looking things up on the side“. If so, be transparent, and don't take offense if you are called out.

Both parties should be clear whether the meeting is full focus, or whether people are just listening in and specifically multitask, e.g. when they have more supporting roles.

Relationship building only works in intentful focused interactions.

To what degree do you pay focused attention to the person when you are both in professional and casual conversations at work ?

Do you observe a difference when you are online or offline in the encounter?

What kind of connections do I need, provide and should I cultivate ?

At work, different people support us in different ways. Tom Rath's "Vital Friends" model (Gallup) identifies eight important roles colleagues often fulfill:

- Builder – Motivates your growth and development.
- Champion – Stands up for you and highlights your strengths.
- Collaborator – Shares mutual goals and supports your efforts.
- Companion – Offers genuine friendship beyond just tasks.
- Connector – Introduces you to new people and opportunities.
- Energizer – Provides positivity and lifts your spirits.
- Navigator – Gives guidance and clarity in difficult situations.
- Mind Opener – Encourages new ideas and different perspectives.

These roles describe universal ways people can support one another—not a checklist to complete. You don't have to turn every connection into a friendship. Instead, use this model as a lens to reflect on the social dynamics around you, and identify which forms of support matter most to you right now.

Review what roles your colleagues play for you, which role are you missing in your network, and which roles give you the most joy to provide to other colleagues.

- Which colleagues do I interact with most?
- Which colleagues do I interact with most frequently? What kind of support do I already receive – and where could I build even stronger connections?
- What role do I personally enjoy taking on for others – and where can I make the most of my strengths?

The book Practical Friendship expands on this concept by also including personal relationships and offering a broader psychosocial taxonomy. However, for a purely work-focused perspective, the emphasis remains on the roles that strengthen professional connections and contribute to social support within the organization.

Priya Parker: Art of Gathering

The book is a great resource on how to design meetings both professional and private to achieve their main goals, but also to facilitate connection.

1. Purposeful Intent:

Clearly define the purpose of every gathering—what is it for, and what do you hope participants feel or experience? Meetings become more impactful when everyone knows the goal and their role in it.

2. Explicit Welcome and Framing:

Start by clearly stating why each person is there and how their participation matters. This explicit acknowledgment fosters a sense of belonging and inclusion.

3. Create a Safe Environment:

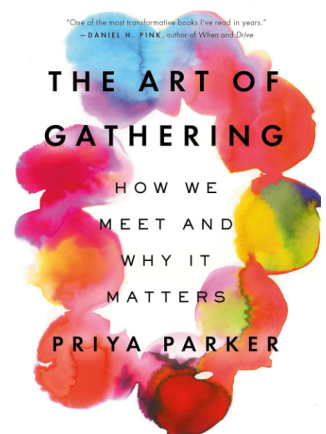
Design meetings that allow genuine exchange by setting rules or expectations (e.g., confidentiality, active listening, or respectful disagreement). People build relationships when they feel safe enough to speak openly.

4. Facilitate Active Participation and Interaction:

Rather than letting meetings drift passively, actively structure interactions—whether through paired conversations, sharing personal stories, or brief check-ins. Intentional interactions transform mundane meetings into genuine relationship-building opportunities.

5. Thoughtful Opening and Closing Rituals:

Begin and end your gatherings deliberately, perhaps through a meaningful check-in question, reflection, or celebration of small wins. Thoughtful beginnings and closings anchor the group emotionally and socially, enhancing group cohesion.



Asatryan: Stop being lonely

If you are however asking yourself for the bottom line, what to do then a great answer is in the book „Stop being lonely“ by Kira Asatryan. According to this only two things matter when trying to mitigate loneliness - two attitudes towards other people.

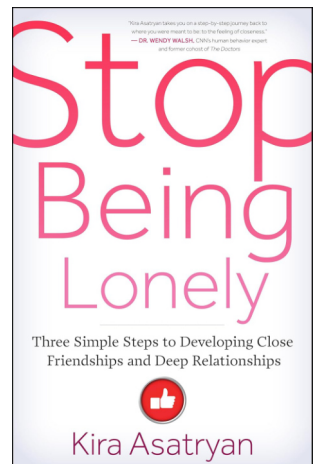
Caring:

- **Prioritizing:** This involves putting the relationship first and showing the other person that they are important to you.
- **Tending:** Regularly nurturing the relationship, much like caring for a plant, by giving it time and attention.
- **Mending:** Addressing and repairing any issues in the relationship to prevent misunderstandings and resentments from accumulating.
- **Appreciating:** Expressing gratitude and appreciation for the other person, recognizing their value in your life.

Knowing:

- **Understanding:** Making an effort to truly understand the other person's thoughts, feelings, and experiences.
- **Revealing:** Sharing your own inner world and being transparent about your thoughts and feelings, which fosters intimacy.
- **Connecting:** Creating meaningful connections through shared experiences and activities that both people enjoy.
- **Protecting:** Safeguarding the relationship by maintaining confidentiality and showing loyalty.

These two principles – caring and understanding – form the foundation of strong social relationships and help actively counteract loneliness.



Leaders supporting connection building

Social connection is not so much a key leadership issue, one can say that the key responsibility lies with the individuals to take the necessary steps for themselves as well as for the general organisation to facilitate a good environment to do so. However some habits can help to improve social connection building in your team:

1. **Regular Personal Check-Ins:**

Schedule brief, informal one-on-one conversations regularly, not only to discuss work but also to check how employees are doing personally.

2. **Encourage Peer Pairing:**

Encourage employees to pair up occasionally for short coffee breaks or walks, fostering mutual support and casual interactions.

3. **Facilitate Frequent Small Team Exchanges:**

Create brief, regular moments (daily or weekly) for casual team interaction, ensuring every team member feels involved and acknowledged.

4. **Notice Quiet Employees:**

Pay attention to team members who withdraw or interact less frequently; actively (but gently) invite their participation and feedback.

5. **Make Remote Contact Meaningful:**

When working remotely, encourage small gestures like cameras-on greetings, chat messages of appreciation, or virtual "coffee moments," to maintain warmth and presence.

Post-section checkup for review some months later again

How am I doing in terms of workplace connection?

- I regularly interact positively with my colleagues
- I make time for casual chats, coffee breaks, or shared social moments.
- I've reached out to at least one colleague to build or renew a connection.
- I try to include quieter or less-connected team members in conversations or activities.
- I contribute to a positive and supportive atmosphere in meetings and team interactions.
- I take time to listen to my coworkers and show genuine interest in them.
- I notice and appreciate small positive gestures from colleagues.
- I feel I have supportive work relationships I can rely on.
- I've had at least one new or deeper conversation with a colleague recently.
- I actively strengthen my social connections at work when opportunities arise.

What is Loneliness ?

Reality and risks

Our social connections are important and we need to take care of them.

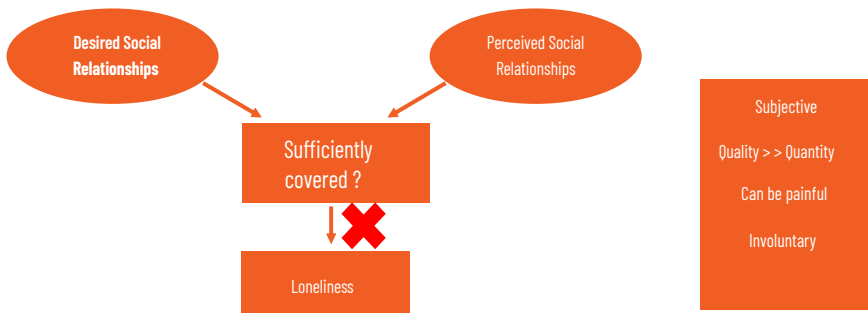
Whilst good relationships are important also in most work places, some and that is perfectly acceptable, choose to keep workplace relationships purely professional and develop personal relationships only in the private life.

The next section is dedicated to the issue that if personal relationships are kept neither at work nor in private life, or if overall our relationships deteriorate, then we can experience loneliness. This experience and the consequences will now be explained.

What is Loneliness ?

Loneliness is the perceived gap between desired and actual social relationships. It is a feeling that, in chronic form, can be painful and significantly diminish quality of life.

(Based on Luhmann 2022 and Peplau/Perlman)



Types of Loneliness

Loneliness can be further divided into different types:

Social Loneliness

Social loneliness is characterized by the absence of social contacts and the feeling of not being integrated into society.

Emotional Loneliness

Emotional loneliness is defined by the absence of high-quality relationships—friends and family who truly understand you and with whom you share a close bond.

Existential Loneliness

Existential loneliness is the feeling of no longer being relevant or important to society and close contacts—"dead without being deceased."

In addition, there are **Cultural** and **Physical Loneliness**. (More detailed definitions and explanations can be found in Luhmann 2022 - KNE)

Difference between temporary and chronic loneliness

Loneliness can be a passing feeling or a persistent state, and the difference matters. Temporary loneliness is a natural emotional signal, much like hunger, reminding us to reconnect when social ties weaken—for example, when starting a new job or moving to a new city. Chronic loneliness, however, occurs when this feeling persists over weeks or months, leading to emotional distress, withdrawal, and even physical health risks. While temporary loneliness can motivate us to seek connection, chronic loneliness can create a self-reinforcing cycle where social isolation deepens, making reconnection increasingly difficult.

Whilst temporary loneliness is unpleasant but a healthy motivator to seek connection, chronic loneliness is a severe problem that more often than not also requires substantial support.

Question:

Have you ever experienced disconnection impacting your work performance or motivation?

What Loneliness is not ?

Social Isolation

Social isolation is an objective measure in sociology and characterizes the number and duration of social contacts that occur within a month.(Characteristics: Objective, quantity, no statement about intention or emotion)

Being Alone

Being alone is the voluntary and pleasant state of being without company, often to pursue activities such as reading or relaxing.

(Characteristics: Subjective, pleasant, voluntary)

Introversion

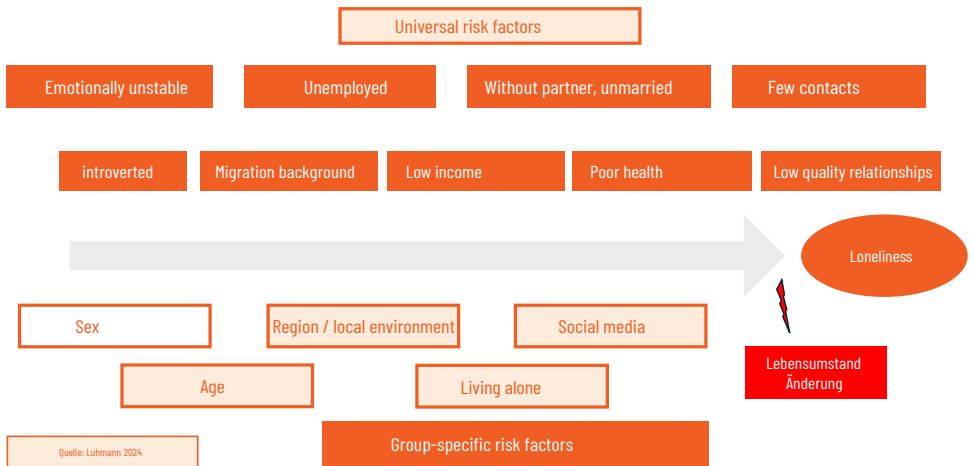
In particular loneliness is not an active choice to limit interactions with others a bit or on a relative basis not seek them out too much given shyness or introversion.

It becomes loneliness once that decision is not according to one's own preferences for connection given past negative experiences or rejection by others.

Reflect: How has workplace change impacted your connections ?

Do you find you have less time for dedicated lunches or other casual interactions?

Which groups are impacted ?



There is rarely a single definitive reason why people experience loneliness. Intuitively, it seems that each risk factor makes connecting with others and maintaining a fulfilling social life a bit more difficult—often gradually over time.

A significant change in life circumstances then triggers a shift in perception.

These are often events such as moving to a new city for a job change, the separation from or death of a partner, a serious illness, the addition of a new family member, a family member requiring care, unemployment, or retirement.

Work focus

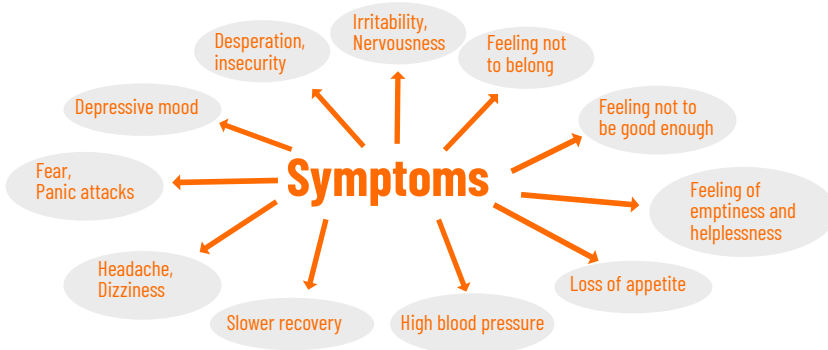
Role change, team change, relocation, promotion and thus change in relationship to team, long building developments culminating.

Question:

Are any of these risk factors present in my life?

Was I subject to any major changes in my life circumstances recently?

Which consequences does chronic loneliness have for our health ?



Put simply, loneliness is not good for us. Studies have shown that chronic loneliness affects us more severely than smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Wounds heal more slowly, serious illnesses linger, hospital stays are prolonged, and life expectancy is shortened. In broad terms, chronic loneliness creates a state of ongoing stress that negatively impacts our immune system—details can be found in KNE - Bückner 2022 (German) or „Loneliness“ by Caccioppo.

The good news is that this applies in full to only a small minority. On the flip side, a strong social network acts as a protective factor, making everything in life easier and better—much like healthy nutrition, regular exercise, and good sleep.

Efforts to enhance our social integration are therefore always beneficial—for both our mental and physical health.

How does Loneliness impact us - consequences of the downward spiral

Loneliness is, to a certain extent, a natural part of human experience and development. Like hunger, it serves as a signal emotion that prompts a helpful response.

Loneliness becomes problematic only when it persists for a long time and changes us to the point where a self-reinforcing downward spiral occurs:

- when everyday social interactions are perceived as threatening,
- when we fundamentally question whether others value or care for us—or even could,
- when we no longer notice positive signals or ignore their significance for us.

Additionally, loneliness drains our energy, making it harder to try again. Overcoming the inner resistance to make another attempt becomes increasingly difficult. In such cases, professional support from psychologists, counselors, and social workers can be a first step. They can help identify and reduce these thought and behavior patterns to a point where we can reconnect with others.

How do Organizations cause loneliness

Organizational Silos

- Separation between departments and teams limits social interactions and reduces natural opportunities to build relationships.
- Limited cross-team contact can isolate individuals, creating a feeling of disconnection.

Changes in Work Patterns and Structures

- Rapid shifts such as increased home office and hybrid work disrupt daily routines and established relationships.
- Research shows these shifts can significantly reduce spontaneous interactions, raising the risk of loneliness.

Cultural and Inclusion Gaps

- Teams lacking awareness or sensitivity toward differences in culture, lifestyle, or personal needs risk unintentionally excluding some colleagues.
- Even subtle forms of exclusion—like missed invitations or overlooked contributions—can cause employees to feel isolated and less valued.

**Reflect: How has workplace change impacted your connections ?
Do you find you have less time for dedicated lunches or other casual interactions?**

How does Loneliness impact the organisation

Declining Engagement and "Quiet Quitting"

- Employees experiencing loneliness often withdraw emotionally, leading to reduced motivation, productivity, and engagement—commonly referred to as "quiet quitting."
- Chronic loneliness significantly increases the risk of stress-related illnesses and burnout, directly impacting organizational effectiveness through increased sick leave and lower overall team performance.

Health Consequences and Depressive Effects

- Loneliness is closely tied to mental health issues, including depression, which is proven to increase absenteeism and decrease work productivity.
- Even moderate loneliness can escalate into a downward spiral of negative thoughts and reduced energy, creating barriers to healthy interactions and diminishing morale within teams.

Ripple Effect on Team Dynamics

- When loneliness affects multiple members, it can diminish team cohesion, reduce collaborative spirit, and lead to an overall loss of motivation and creativity.
- Addressing loneliness proactively is critical—positive team dynamics and strong interpersonal support can help break the cycle, benefiting both individual well-being and organizational productivity.

What is belonging ?

Fostering belonging, an organizational mission

Organizational belonging is the experience of feeling truly included, valued, and connected—as if you're part of a supportive community. Good leadership sets the foundation, but everyone contributes through small acts of inclusion, acceptance, and mutual support. A high sense of belonging significantly boosts engagement, creativity, and productivity, with research showing performance improvements of up to 56% (Harvard Business Review). By actively reflecting on when and why we feel included, we can all contribute to creating workplaces that function as meaningful communities. (<https://hbr.org/2019/12/the-value-of-belonging-at-work>)

What does belonging mean for an organisation ?

Something like belonging is difficult to actually get right in a single definition. So here are three descriptions of what a place with “good belonging” looks like.

Social Connection & Trust: Belonging Through Relationships

"A state in which team members trust, understand, and appreciate one another, strengthened through authentic interactions, informal moments, and shared experiences that go beyond formal roles. Belonging in this sense means feeling safe to be yourself, knowing that colleagues genuinely care about you beyond just work tasks. It is built through small daily interactions—laughing together, checking in on one another, and sharing personal milestones—that make work feel like a place where you are valued as a person, not just an employee."

Valuing Strengths & Inclusion: Belonging Through Recognition

"An environment where colleagues celebrate and value each other's unique strengths, experiences, and backgrounds, fostering mutual support, deep respect, and a strong sense of shared purpose. True belonging doesn't require people to change who they are to fit in; instead, it allows them to contribute in a way that is authentic to their identity and abilities. A workplace where belonging thrives recognizes individual differences as assets, ensuring that everyone has a voice and feels their contributions matter."

Culture, Recognition & Safety: Belonging Through Workplace Environment

"A workplace culture in which leadership and team dynamics foster deep connection, recognition, and respect—creating a shared sense of identity that naturally encourages collaboration, open communication, and emotional safety. Belonging in this sense means knowing you won't be judged for your ideas, mistakes, or personal background, but instead will be supported in learning and contributing. It requires organizations to actively cultivate psychological safety, where employees trust that they can be honest, share concerns, and take risks without fear of exclusion or punishment."

Activity: What does your organisations DEI statement say about belonging?

Belonging - created by us for others and by others for us

Belonging is like trust—while we cannot simply "decide" to have it, we can act in ways that cultivate it. We create belonging when we invite others in, when we contribute to shared spaces, and when we engage meaningfully. But ultimately, true belonging is something we experience together—it exists in the space between us, not inside us alone.

Individual paths to belonging - how can I support creating belonging

1. Welcome Others In

- Notice when someone's quiet or new, and invite them into chats or group hangouts.
- Call out cool stuff your colleagues do, and make sure everyone feels seen.

2. Be Real and Open

- Share a bit about your own life, hobbies, or experiences—being real encourages others to open up too.
- Ask colleagues genuine questions about their day or interests, showing you care beyond just work.

3. Create Fun Rituals

- Set up regular coffee breaks, lunch groups, or quick chats to connect on a personal level.
- Celebrate small things—like someone's birthday or a team win—to build memories together.

4. Look Out for Your Team

- Offer a helping hand if someone seems stressed or stuck—small gestures mean a lot.
- Give your colleagues quick shout-outs when they do something awesome; positivity spreads fast.

5. Be Cool With Differences

- Be open and curious about colleagues who think, act, or see the world differently—everyone's got something valuable to bring.
- If someone's feeling left out, step up gently and make space for them, creating a chill atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable.

Leaders impact on creating an inclusive organisation

1. Show Genuine Interest in Each Person

Greet team members by name, ask about their week, and truly listen to their responses. Small personal check-ins go a long way toward making people feel valued

2. Encourage Regular Team-Bonding Moments

Set aside brief “team huddles” or casual coffee breaks to share updates and celebrate wins—no big speeches, just real connection. Mini-rituals build familiarity and group identity.

3. Offer Real-Time Support and Recognition

When someone contributes, acknowledge it on the spot—whether it’s a good idea or a small help they provided. Immediate, sincere praise fosters a sense of belonging and boosts trust.

4. Lead by Example in Vulnerability

Share personal anecdotes or lessons learned, showing it’s safe to speak honestly and make mistakes. Teams feel closer when leaders are open about their own growth and challenges.

5. Pair People for Peer Support

Encourage short “buddy chats” or skill-sharing sessions between team members who rarely interact. Purposeful one-on-one connections can deepen empathy and bonding across different roles.

Feeling to belong and feeling understood

Cultural and personal differences within teams may also - and in many cases unnecessarily so - lead to feelings of not being understood or appreciated, and thus not belonging and lonely.

This trivial fact has justifiably received a lot of attention, and tools with subsequent workshops can identify such differences reliably. If it is known in the team on which scale e.g. a certain behaviour is different (e.g. Everybody in the team treats deadlines as fix, and one person is more flexible as long as there is progress), then it can be addressed. This does not mean harmonized, and it is not intended to stigmatize, but to communicate better and clearer

Differences should be understood and managed - not „fixed“.

The Cultural Navigator of Berlitz

One great tool to identify differences in a respectful, valuing and yet thorough way is the tool Cultural Navigator by Berlitz. It is mostly used for relocation services and cultural advisory, and is available at several of Germany's larger corporations.



This may not be only such tool, however if someone is not quite feeling like belonging, but cannot put their finger on it, this may be a structured way to identify issues in behaviour and thinking.

The great thing about this tool is in small teams of say 4-6 people it is possible to put everyone on a map and then analyse whether daily irritations can simply be explained by such cultural differences.

Other tools or resources, without claim of completeness, are Hofstede's culture compass, the cultural intelligence center, Globesmart or the world values survey (as an academic resource)

Do the cultural navigator exercise in the entire team

Special groups ?

Whilst loneliness is a general issue, it usually affects specific groups worse than the rest. Loneliness is very risk factor driven, with a baseline feeling exacerbated by difficult situations of life change. In particular five key groups can be identified who are more at risk than the „standard employees“.

- Parents and people caring for sick relatives
- Newbies
- Near retired
- Employees with hidden challenges
- Less visible employees and regular contracting staff

Special groups - Newbies & Freshers

Prioritize introductions: Within your first few weeks, set aside dedicated time for personal one-on-one chats—not just team meetings—to help quickly build familiarity and comfort.

Be curious about team culture: Notice informal team habits and ask colleagues questions about routines and norms, helping you integrate smoothly and authentically.

Share a bit of yourself: Offer small, casual details about your life or interests to make yourself relatable and build common ground early on.

Join or propose informal activities: Participate in social activities like lunches, group breaks, or casual team rituals—these small moments quickly build connection.

Find a buddy (or ask for one): Seek out or request a mentor or buddy who can help guide you, clarify unwritten rules, and integrate you socially during your initial months.

Special Groups - Parents, single parents

Clearly communicate your needs: Be open with your team about your caregiving responsibilities and let them know how they can best support you—clarity builds empathy.

Seek Flexible Work Arrangements: Proactively discuss flexible hours or home-office options with your supervisor; finding the right balance reduces stress and isolation.

Build Peer Connections: Join or help initiate a peer support network or parent group within your organization—shared experiences create natural and supportive bonds.

Use Short Check-ins to Stay Connected: Regularly schedule quick informal check-ins (virtually or in person) to remain visible and feel connected to your colleagues despite other responsibilities.

Normalize Open Communication: Occasionally share authentic glimpses of your experiences or challenges related to caregiving—your openness can encourage others to understand your situation, fostering a deeper sense of belonging.

Special Groups - near retired

Share Your Knowledge: Offer mentorship or informal coaching to younger colleagues, ensuring your expertise is valued and relationships remain strong.

Strengthen Bonds Early: Cultivate meaningful personal connections with colleagues now—these relationships can continue beyond your active working years.

Look Ahead with Clarity: Consider the relationships you'd like to sustain after retirement; actively invest in those connections while still at work.

Explore Outside Communities: Gradually get involved in groups or communities outside work, creating new connections that will continue supporting you after retirement.

Define Your Legacy: Contribute to meaningful projects or initiatives at work during your remaining years to enhance your sense of purpose and leave a positive impact others will remember.

Special Groups - employees with hidden challenges - disabled or sick

Employees facing personal difficulties, illnesses, or caregiving responsibilities often experience unique barriers to social connection—here's how they can stay included and supported:

Share Selectively, But Honestly: Let trusted colleagues know what you're comfortable sharing about your situation—honesty often encourages empathy and support.

Maintain Frequent Small Interactions: Even brief, regular exchanges or check-ins help maintain visibility and connections, especially when full participation isn't possible.

Seek Customized Arrangements: Discuss tailored accommodations or adjustments with your supervisor, making it easier to remain active and involved at work.

Tap Into or Create Support Networks: Find or initiate peer-support groups within the company; connecting with others facing similar challenges fosters mutual understanding and inclusion.

Less visible employees and regular contracting staff

Reach out intentionally: Proactively initiate small interactions, even a quick "hello," to gradually become more visible and strengthen bonds with colleagues.

Find your niche or interest group: Join groups or activities aligned with your interests—even informally—to naturally engage and build authentic connections.

Communicate your wins: Share your achievements or successes occasionally; gently stepping into the spotlight can help others recognize your value and contribution.

Buddy up with colleagues: Develop closer connections by suggesting coffee chats or short walks with a trusted colleague, reducing isolation through regular interactions.

Seek or offer practical support: Offer help or ask for advice on specific tasks; mutual assistance often leads to meaningful relationships and helps others see your presence and value clearly.

Offers for acutely lonely people

If loneliness becomes chronic or overwhelming, seeking help early is crucial. Here's how you can find support, wherever you are:

Reach Out Internally: Most organizations provide confidential Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) or internal counselling resources—don't hesitate to use them.

Connect with Colleagues You Trust: Talk privately with a trusted colleague or supervisor who can help guide you to appropriate internal or external support options.

Professional Help Is Always Appropriate: Seek support from a trained mental health professional, counselor, or therapist—online or in person—for structured guidance.

Explore Anonymous Support Hotlines: Many countries offer anonymous telephone or online support services for immediate emotional assistance, such as crisis hotlines or mental health helplines.

You Are Not Alone: Remember loneliness is a common human experience; asking for support is a strength, not a weakness—your organization values your well-being and wants you to reach out.

Tools to support

There are a range of exercises and activities that can be proposed to be done, and on our website www.initiative-gemeinsamkeit.de in the Tool box, friendship course and other publications we do propose a few more of these. Here in this brochure on social connection, loneliness and belonging we want to round the publication off with three pages that have a potential lunch-and-learn or team meeting session outline, and then some signposts or pointers to other sources and literature to find out more.

We thought of two ways of structuring this section:

I Connection - loneliness - belonging - keep it as this booklet has been structured so far.

II Personal - Team - Organizational - it might be the better format for reviewing company culture or thinking about joint activities, if embedding the connection-loneliness discussion into a wider culture process.

In this current version we will go with version I.

Session: Personal Connection

Mapping workplace relationships:

- o Write down 3 - 10 colleagues you interact with regularly
- o For each ask: Do I know them well? Do they know me? Do we care about each other?

Reciprocity reflection:

- o Identify one colleague where the caring/knowing balance feels uneven.
- o Discuss: How can I shift this relationship toward more mutual support?

How do work relationships develop:

- o Think about a strong work relationship you've built over time.
- o Discuss: What made it grow? What actions helped?

What can you now put into action over the next weeks?

Literature: Personal Connection

Kira Asatryan: Stop being lonely (deepening relationships through knowing and caring)

Robin Dunbar: Friends
(friends and workplace connections from a preeminent scientist)

Initiative GemEinsamkeit: Friendship course for Adults

Tom Rath & Gallup: Vital friends (this is really about friends at work)

John Gottman: The science of trust (micropositive interactions)

Session: Loneliness

Recognizing workplace loneliness

- o Think of a time when you or someone you know felt disconnected at work.
- o Discuss: What were the signs? How did it impact work and well-being?

Breaking the Silence on Loneliness

- o In pairs or small groups, discuss: Why is loneliness often hard to admit?
- o Brainstorm ways teams can create safe spaces for open conversations.

Building Bridges, Not Walls

- o Reflect: What's one small action that helped you feel more connected at work?
- o Discuss ideas for how each person can help a colleague feel included.

Literature: Loneliness

John Cacioppo and William Patrick: Loneliness

Vivek Murthy: Work and the loneliness epidemic
<https://hbr.org/2017/09/work-and-the-loneliness-epidemic>

Initiative GemEinsamkeit: Literature List (continually updated over time)

Session: Belonging

When Have You Felt You Truly Belonged?

- o Think of a time—at work or elsewhere—when you felt completely included.
- o Discuss: What made that experience special? What contributed to that sense of belonging?

Spotting Gaps in Inclusion

- o Reflect: Who in our team might feel less included, and why?
- o Discuss in pairs: What small actions could help everyone feel more valued?

Belonging as a Daily Habit

- o What simple, everyday gestures make people feel seen and appreciated?
- o Brainstorm: What is one small thing we can all start doing in our team today?

Literature: Belonging

Peter Block: Community - the structure of belonging

Berlitz - Cultural Navigator

Sebastian Junger: Tribe

About us

The Initiative GemEinsamkeit is a small NGO with the aim of creating a knowledge and networking platform for practical, applied work on loneliness. Globally and in Germany, there are already numerous projects that have helped lonely people and fostered sociability and high-quality friendships. Through building our network and ongoing discussions with our partners, we aim to:

1. Collect promising, ready-to-use approaches.
2. Discuss them in suitable online and in-person formats.
3. Provide professional support for their implementation in pilot projects and gather feedback.
4. Aggregate these approaches into a comprehensible, publicly accessible, and continuously evolving collection (Open Educational Resource).
5. Distribute finalized ready-to-use approaches within our network.

We do not conduct our own scientific research, as scientific research and societal analysis are already comprehensively and excellently carried out by the European research network "Loneliness in Europe" and the Kompetenznetzwerk Einsamkeit mandated by the Federal Government / BMFSJ through 2026 . Our role is to support the third and final step: integrating analytical results with practical experiences and "packaging" them into ready-to-use guidelines. In this way, we aim to contribute to addressing loneliness in Germany.

We currently finance our activities through thank-you donations from institutions that use our templates free of charge, speaking fees for online or in-person presentations on workplace loneliness and private contributions of the team. Otherwise, we strive to operate with a minimal footprint.

Any comments, suggestions, requests for collaborations etc., please contact us at Initiative Gemeinsamkeit, hallo@initiative-gemeinsamkeit.de

Appendix: Implementation

Outlook on services and research

For all the significance of the topic – the amount of consistent and wideranging research as well as practical guidance is surprisingly limited. Really compiling a „best practice“ for corporate connection creation or a focussed anti-loneliness campaign is not feasible at this point.

There are some general standards or guidelines for general corporate mental health (in German „Betriebliches Gesundheitsmanagement - BGM“) but for loneliness and connection there does not seem to be a single documented and analysed connection, loneliness and belonging campaign for this topic.

In Germany the **Institute für Sozialarbeit und Sozialpädagogik** together with the association of corporate health insurances (BKK) has started an extensive research project to analyse the causes, types and consequences of loneliness in the work place.

<https://www.iss-ffm.de/themen/alter/projekte/einsamkeit-am-arbeitsplatz>

Likewise the Anney behavioural science lab (<https://absi.io/loneliness-consultancy/connected-workplaces/>) in combination with Humans:Connecting (<https://www.humansconnecting.org/creating-connected-workplaces>) are also offering consultancy and research services.

Situation in the company

The other key question is, if a corporation decides to do something about workplace connection and loneliness - what can be currently recommended to the best of knowledge.

Company descriptives

- Workforce structure - demographics, education level, work style (manual, knowledge, service)
- Geographic / Building spread
- On-site all together or different degrees of digital organisation with mobile working

HR structures

- HR support structures, welfare program, social support, possibilities of establishing support networks or peer support groups
- Support from health services & insurance in locations of company
- Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives with varying focus
- Company culture - Trust levels, belonging to the organisation, social structure

Campaign or activity structure

- Onsite:
Presentations, general large group get together, larger discussions
Small team activities: Lunch and learn, facilitated discussions, small team exercises
- Digital: Online presentations and get together, train the trainer, ...
- Website & Material: How much is right, what to focus on, what is too superficial, what is helpful, ...
-

Open question: Measuring loneliness

In loneliness research, there are a number of loneliness measures, UCLA and DeJong-Gierveld. In 2006 Wright, Burt and Strongman also developed the LAWS - Loneliness at Work scale. It probably also needs to be viewed in context to a organizational climate questionnaire.

However the key decision is sequence. Generating a direct dataset as a starting point for a campaign is desirable, but usually companies do major surveys only once a year, and doing a survey separate from this costs substantial company resources. In case of an institutional annual survey, the inclusion of a few wellchosen questions on loneliness, organizational belonging can be great starting point to running a campaign at a later point.

If a questionnaire is to be administered outside an annual survey, it should convey some direct benefit to the person sitting it, i.e. both generate data for the company as well as have an evaluative part that points the person sitting it to resources and potential activities.

The other question is what the data and its analysis is used for: Go or no-go decision for the campaign, different focus points of the campaign and activities, later evaluation of the campaign. Different goals might require different questions and combinations.

Open question: Recognizing Loneliness

One key question is to what degrees leaders should be encouraged to look out for loneliness. On the one hand, looking out for colleagues and the team members they are responsible for, and enabling them to also address loneliness is a key objective of any campaign.

On the other hand there are plenty of caveats to place the focus more on a lateral level.

- As loneliness is correlated to a number of performance related issues, it might not be safe to open up to a supervisor
- Loneliness is stigmatised, and in the severe chronic form it is closely related to depression and a number of other severe conditions. None of these would be safe to let your employer or the HR department know explicitly about.
- Like depression, even for a skilled psychologist, it is difficult to diagnose with certainty and specificity. The idea to have untrained leaders and HR staff screening for loneliness should at least be treated with caution.

Open question: Resources for types of project

Essentially there are four types of projects:

1. Plain information and awareness campaign: The HR or DEI team assembles some suitable resources on an internal website and manages their dispersal
2. Company or organisational culture focused campaign - accompanied by cultural consultant, speaking to HR, DEI teams and a few other people, then building a concept of a campaign
3. Thorough review using first interviews to scope problem, then using a questionnaire administered to both a random general sample of the company combined with a second sample of people typically at heightened risk of loneliness to estimate severity for focus groups.
4. Subproject, subcampaign or work stream of general company culture review or general mental health campaign.

This scope then determines also the external resources and competencies required to achieve the goals of this project.

Open question: Learning scope and time budget

The final question is how much time the hosting organisation decides to dedicate into this. This will depend on how serious the leadership, concretely the decision maker thinks the topic is. This will have two parts - the philanthropic part (loneliness is bad for my employees, I have a wholistic view on them, want them to thrive and if they do, the company profits) and the pragmatic part (loneliness has more or less tangible negative effects on corporate culture, performance metrics and other items). Whilst financial resources are one thing, the other key variable for project success is the expected time the „average employee“ is likely to spend on interacting with the campaign and the „target employee“ is likely to spend on interacting with the campaign. As most people consume company content in their working time rather than their own time, this is the true cost driver for total cost of the campaign.

Thus most decision focus should - far beyond cash-out project cost - be on „is the expected outcome worth the sizeable time effort of employees, and how can I ensure it reaches the target group best with the most effective outcome for them.“

If the answer to this cannot be given, it is better not to do a major campaign at all and just maybe to provide some general information, possibly by a third provider such as the main health insurance providers or local health authorities.

In the next section we go through a few hypothetical project designs where the scale of the issue would justify a project beyond mere internal awareness.

Case study 1: Multinational corporation

A multinational company with 5000 employees, half administrative and half in production, 5 key production sites and 20 country & sales offices has gone through the Covid Pandemic with rigorous distancing, and people have gotten used to the homeoffice. An initial review project within HR yielded a number of indicators pointing to missing connection as a key challenge for the company:

- Engagement surveys show a drop in workplace connectedness and team collaboration
- Exit interviews reveal employees feeling disconnected from colleagues and mission. Employee retention is decreasing, specifically younger employees struggle building their networks.
- There is rising absenteeism, increased sick leave, higher demand for psychological support
- The social capital of the company does not feel like it used to, different departments are not as connected anymore as they used to be. Specifically the bonds between production staff, research and product development, though all at the same site have dwindled and the rate of projects generated is decreasing.

Due to these indicators it is decided that loneliness and disconnection is not just a wellbeing project, but a business necessity to maintain productivity, innovation and retention.

Measures

1. Awareness and education campaign:
Posters, newsletter and an online resource hub. Toolkit is distributed to team leaders, lunch and learn sessions on workplace relationships
2. Structured connection initiative:
Peer connection program pairing for informal networking, rebuilding informal spaces with sponsored coffee chats and social rooms, leadership trainings on team cohesion and psychological safety
3. Integrated strategy:
Company-wide connection survey to track employee sentiment, interdepartment exchange programs

Case study 2: Regional schoolboard

A regional schoolboard overseeing 10 schools with a total of 400 teachers is observing warning signs among their staff.

- Teachers are leaving schools for other jobs citing burnout, stress and disconnection with a job they formerly loved
- There is decreasing collaboration and team cohesion among the teachers in the school
- Also higher proportions of pupils are suspected of suffering from loneliness and disconnection to their fellow students, interaction between students is becoming less civil and empathic
- Time pressures and coping with a difficult situation has also led to a growing disconnect between teachers and students, as they invest less and less time in them.
- Whilst digital tools improve content dispersal and general communication efficiency, they do inhibit relationship building between teachers and students.

Given these findings, the schoolboard decides on a connection campaign, supporting both teachers and students in connection building and bonding, to strengthen the basis of joint community.

Measures

1. Awareness and Education
Connection toolkit for schools, webinars and resource handouts, encouraging staff lunches and teacher break areas for social bonding
2. Structured Initiative
Mentorship program for new teachers, cross-school collaboration spaces, classroom connection strategies for strengthening teacher-student bonds
3. Integrated strategy
Teacher well-being & connection survey to track burnout and belonging
Schedule adjustments for peer collaboration activities

Case study 3: Regional health insurance

A regional health insurance provider covering 100k clients with an annual turnover of about 420 mio EUR is noticing the following trends among their mixed age client base. As a sizeable proportion of their clients are also with one of 12 large regional corporates, and the insurance has good connection to the respective HR and EHS responsables there, these trends can be specifically corroborated among their working covered clients base.

- Rising mental health claims and increased use of psychological services, higher claims for antidepressants and stress related treatments
- Increasing long term sick leave due to burnout and mental health issues among employees
- Increasing emergency room visits for socially isolated individuals
- Worsening health outcomes despite medical treatment

Given these findings, the insurance decides that a prevention oriented campaign will not benefit the clients, but also be a good investment to prevent further rising costs.

Measures

1. Awareness and Education
Public information campaign on health impact, corporate HR partner training on how to address loneliness in the workplace, self assessment tools
2. Structured Initiative
Peer support and group coaching for insured members with online or in-person meetups, workplace loneliness prevention pilot with selected corporate clients, mental health checkups and personalized referrals to encourage earlier intervention
3. Integrated Strategy
Insurance policy adjustment to include social connection programs and psychological support apps in the offers, cross sector collaboration partnering with cities, NGOs and employee initiatives, Data and research strategy to quantify regional trends.